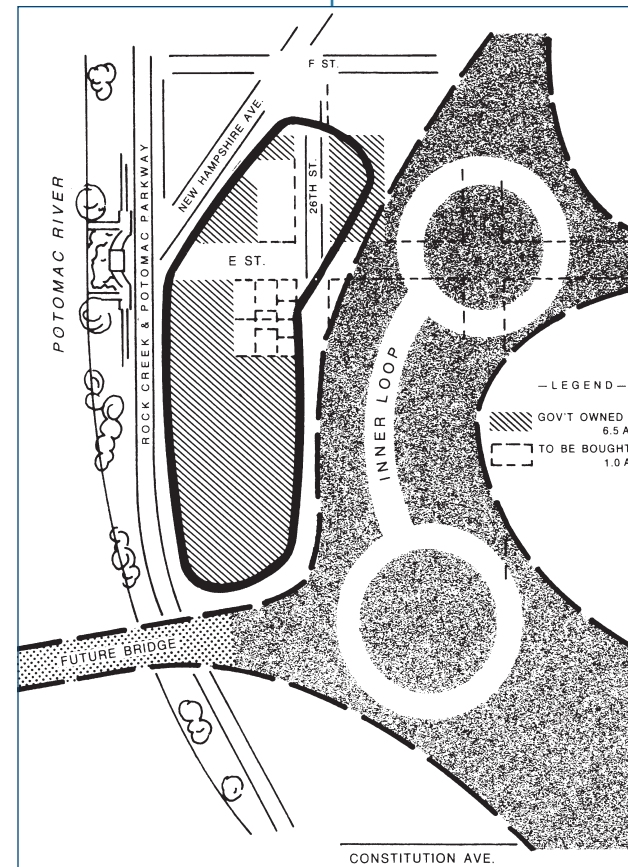


Historical Background

Development of a National Cultural Center began in earnest in 1958 when President Eisenhower signed bipartisan legislation for its creation. Locating a site large enough to accommodate the Center's functions and suit its national character was particularly challenging. This single issue created so much controversy that the project nearly died on several occasions. Almost half a century later, overcoming the site's shortcomings and providing an appropriate setting remain national concerns.

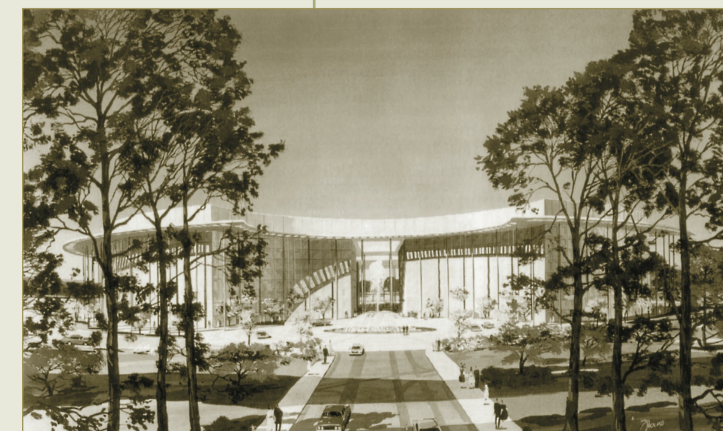
During the early stages of the Center's development, several locations were considered, including the National Mall (specifically, where the National Air and Space Museum is located), the Southwest Redevelopment Area (near L'Enfant Plaza), along Pennsylvania Avenue, the Pension Building, and in Foggy Bottom along the Potomac River. All of the sites were problematic, leading Roger Stevens, then Chairman of the Center's Board of Trustees to lament, "I have yet to be asked to consider a specific site which is both suitable and available."



This late 1950's view shows that the Center's site was severely constrained by the imposition of the Potomac Freeway and its connections to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge.



The Center's initial design was far more elaborate than the building that was eventually constructed. It had strong ties to the riverfront and other surroundings.



The original plan included a strong visual tie with the City and a building seamlessly integrated into its environment.

During the same period, the Army Corps of Engineers was seeking an alignment for a bridge (now the Interstate 66-Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge) to link Virginia with a new complex of roads in the District (an ill-fated Inner Loop Freeway). Backers of the cultural center helped to secure the bridge's placement. In return, the Corps facilitated the assembling of land in Foggy Bottom. This proved to be a Faustian bargain, as the freeway imposed serious constraints on the site.

The Center's initial design was for a grand curvilinear building whose steps would flow to the Potomac River. An idyllic park-like setting would seamlessly integrate the building and its paths, drives, and plantings into the surrounding landscape. A strong visual connection to the City would augment its ties to the building's northeast. The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway would serve as the Center's main access road and was to skirt the building's eastern (city) side.